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SUBJECT: BOGEYMAN OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE STALKS EGYPT:
EGYPTIAN MEDIA THEMES, MARCH 20 TO 27

Summary

¶1. Opposition newspaper Al-Wafd launched a campaign on March 20 against foreign economic assistance and "interference." Several newspapers picked up this thread of criticism throughout the week, but none were as vociferous as Al-Wafd in calling for Egypt to refuse U.S. assistance. Commentators sharply criticized the female imam who led Friday prayers in New York City on March 19. One commentator feared an attempt to "secularize" Islam from within. The media roundly criticized the Arab Summit's failure to accomplish anything, while the summit's highlight for many Egyptian journalists was Moamar Qaddafi's hour-long speech in which he called Israelis and Palestinians "idiots." End summary.

Main Themes in the Egyptian Media

¶2. Fears of foreign interference: In continuing reaction to the Ambassador's March 6 announcement of direct grants to NGOs for democracy and governance work, opposition Al-Wafd (circulation: 200,000) kicked off its campaign against "foreign interference" (i.e., U.S. "interference") on March 20 with the banner headline: "Politicians and Economic Experts Support Al-Wafd Party Chairman's Call: 'No to U.S. Aid.'" On the same day, an Al-Wafd cartoon depicted a foot labeled "Egyptian parties" kicking an Uncle Sam-like figure with a cowboy hat and money bag, labeled "foreign interference." Additional commentaries critical of foreign assistance were published on March 20 in independent Al-Masri Al-Youm (circulation: 5,000) and in opposition weekly Al-Araby (circulation: 20,000). Similar commentaries in print and TV media appeared throughout the week, with Al-Wafd taking the lead in urging the GOE to refuse further U.S. economic assistance. (Note: In a widely published March 19 statement, ruling NDP Secretary General Safwat El-Sherif rejected "foreign interference in Egypt's domestic affairs." End note.)

¶3. Controversy over female imam in New York City: The March 19 Friday prayers in New York City led by Dr. Amina Wadoud prompted critical coverage. Sheikh Tantawi of Al-Azhar Mosque was widely quoted on March 20 saying that a female imam can only lead prayers for women, not for men. A March 22 commentary in pro-government Al-Akhbar (circulation 800,000) entitled "Female Imam Attempts to Secularize Islam" elicited hostile commentaries. "This event is but a smoke screen for vicious intentions aiming to destroy Islam from within," inveighed the commentator. "The goal is to pave the way for preaching a secular Islam conforming to the new global order." A commentator in pro-government Al-Ahram (circulation: 750,000) remarked on March 22, "This is part of an attack on Islam in revenge for September 11." On March 26, papers reported that a female led prayers at a mosque in Boston. A prominent commentator in Al-Akhbar Al-Youm, Ahmed Ragab, wrote March 26, "Al-Azhar and sheikhs and imams of the Moslem world are at fault for having become marginalized and irrelevant."

¶4. Arab League Summit: On March 23 and 24, Nile TV and Nile News featured commentators critical of the summit for its failure to improve the region. An Al-Ahram commentator on March 24 criticized the summit for "failing to meet Arabs' basic aspirations." For many commentators, the summit's highlight was Libyan leader Qaddafi's hour-long speech in which he called both Israelis and Palestinians "idiots" and compared the UN Security Council to a "terrorist organization." Al-Jazeera, the most widely watched satellite channel in Egypt, replayed Qaddafi's speech several times on March 23 and 24. One journalist, claiming to summarize the view of his colleagues, told EmbOff, "Qaddafi might be crazy, but sometimes in a crazy world only mad men have wisdom."

GRAY